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Community Health

## Opioid Crisis: Sharing Stories and Tears, In Hopes Of Destigmatizing Addiction

[May 15, 2018](#) [Beth Young](#) [0 Comments](#)


They started out softly, naming their children and their ages, all in the early years of adulthood at the time they died of opioid overdoses, but after more than an hour of names and stories, there was audible weeping from all corners.

In the center of the amphitheater stage at Good Ground Park in Hampton Bays on a rainy night just before Mother's Day was a ring of 400 small candles, representing all the people who died of opioid overdoses in Suffolk County in 2017. Inside that circle was another, smaller circle of 19 candles representing the Southampton Town residents who died from opioid overdoses last year. And in the center of that circle was one lone candle for the one death in Southampton this year.

Many of the nearly 100 people who gathered for the Southampton Opioid Addiction Task Force's May 12 vigil in remembrance of those lost said they were there to stand up and speak proudly about their loved ones, in an attempt to destigmatize their addictions.

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Shinnecock Nation Tribal Trustee Lance Gumbs lost his son earlier this year. He was told his son had died after smoking marijuana that was laced with the powerful and dangerous synthetic opioid fentanyl.

Mr. Gumbs, who also serves as a Vice President of the National Congress of American Indians, said 100 tribes are suing big pharmaceutical companies for their role in promoting prescription uses of opioids.

"They know what they did," he said. "If anyone wants they can keep themselves in the dark and in denial."

Mr. Gumbs described his son as "a healthy young man, full of life and vigor."

Two weeks earlier, the Shinnecock Nation had lost another young man to an opioid overdose.

"We can't watch this go by," he said. "This disease has no boundaries. It has no eyes. It doesn't see. It has no feeling. It doesn't care. It's a life-consuming entity that is man-made."

"The Shinnecock voice is going to be heard," he added. "They're going to know who we are.... Please do not be silent. Tell your story. Big pharma has to stop doing this."

Musician Alfredo Merat said he'd just lost a friend, John Rosa, "a wonderful musician and a terrific father — he really tried to stay sober," and among his friends he counts parents of nine children who died due to opioid overdoses.

"They're so young, and, unfortunately, so unaware of the danger," he said.

A woman named Danielle shared the story of her sister, Melanie, who died four years ago this October.

"Part of me felt she wouldn't struggle anymore," she said. "There are two deaths — when someone dies and when someone says their name for the last time."

A woman named Debbie lost her son, Henry, at the age of 25.

"He wasn't just a junkie," she said. "He was a good little kid. He liked sports. When he was sober, he was a responsible kid. He had great friends. They're here now."

"People who use should carry NARCAN," she said, referring to the opioid antidote kit used to revive people after an overdose. "And they shouldn't use alone."

Rob Fox lost his son Kyle on Sept. 6 of last year. He stood stoically with his daughter, Sarah, as the rain began to come down harder and town workers struggled to keep the candles lit.



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Kyle was found dead in his car by himself, and, when his family pieced what happened together, they found out that he had been sold fentanyl disguised as oxycodone pills.

Mr. Fox said Kyle had been clean for 14 months when a dentist prescribed oxycodone after he had a tooth extracted, and his son quickly filled all the refills of the prescription.

"You can NARCAN someone five times, and it doesn't bring people back, not when there's fentanyl involved," he said. "He was a wonderful, polite, respectful young man."

"Now, my wife and I spend our days going up island to grief counseling," he said. "My anger is with the pharmaceutical companies. They're poisoning people to make money. As we stand here in the rain, I'm sure CEOs of pharmaceutical companies are sitting in one of their six or seven mansions counting their billions."

Jacqui Leader lost her son Pascal, known as Sax, in November of 2013. She was one of the final speakers as the heavens began to open up and umbrellas popped up throughout the crowd.

"What can I say? You all said it," she said. "He was everything your children were. I didn't want to come tonight. I thought 'are we all gonna just sit around and cry?'"

"It's a different world now without him. Part of me died," she added. "Love is a hard thing to accept from family... I just feel together with all of you and I don't know any of you.... What moves through us is a silence, a sadness."

"Talk about it. Don't sweep it under the rug. I've heard these kids referred to as 'junkies,' but there are so many good, talented kids who had so much to live for," said Drew Scott, who lost his granddaughter last year.

"I'm hoping we'll gather again on an empty stage next year," said Town Supervisor Jay Schneiderman.

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Beth Young

Beth Young has been covering the East End since the 1990s. In her spare time, she runs around the block, tinkers with bicycles, tries not to drown in the Peconic Bay and hopes to grow the perfect tomato. You can send her a message at [editor@eastendbeacon.com](mailto:editor@eastendbeacon.com)

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